

A farewell to a small, black, toothless friend

I took my friend for his last walk around the neighborhood on Saturday.

He was my friend for a long time. He was my wife's friend for even longer. He was small, black, toothless and quadrupedal. Do you know what a Schipperke is? He was one of those.

Since he had his teeth removed, he liked to let his tongue stick out one side of his mouth or the other. He only drooled occasionally, and only when he was thinking about food or someone was cooking.

We walked down to the neighborhood park. My friend and I always enjoyed a good walk together. When I was a smoker, my friend would always walk upwind of me, somehow smart enough to know not only that the smoke wasn't good for him, but also that he didn't like it. That's not the only example I can think of where my friend showed better judgment than me.

I did the walking for both of us on Saturday. His walking days were behind him. At the park, I set him down under a pine. I pulled up a seat at the base of the tree and we sat and watched the cars pass by. We sat until he told me he was ready to go. It was the second time that day he'd said something of that nature.

As I carried him, tucked under my arm like a little hairy football, I noticed that all the animals in the neighborhood were braying. Cats called and squirrels chattered in the trees. Every neighborhood dog barked, or howled. Even that goofy mongrel that sits in the flowerbeds outside the 81st Street School stood at attention as we walked by. It was as if the neighborhood beasts were marking this great friend of mine's final passage. A cacophonous crescendo of life marked my friend's last lap around the old neighborhood.

If—and I certainly hope it's not anytime soon—my final day were to bring me the peace that I think my friend found by the time all was said and done, I should think I would be happy.

Bela was a good dog. A good, good dog. And a better friend.